

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323639902>

Early Vedic Cosmological Narratives: The Seeds of Vedanta

Article · January 2015

CITATIONS

0

READS

2,258

1 author:



[Peter Worth Jr.](#)

Florida Atlantic University

9 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Theology Reconsidered [View project](#)



Ideological Mechanics [View project](#)

Early Vedic Cosmological Narratives: The Seeds of Vedanta

Juan Valdez*

Peter J Worth Jr 389 East 89th St - Apt 29G New York, NY 10128

*Corresponding author (Email: juanvaldez1971@gmail.com)

Abstract - At some level a religious tradition can be thought of as distinguished by, or even defined by, its creation story – i.e. its cosmological narrative - and the Hindu/Vedic tradition is no different in this regard although it has many nuances and variances that distinguish it from Western theological traditions. If we approach the mythology as codified in the Hindu literature with an open mind – and myth in the Hindu tradition runs very deep - we can see strong undercurrents of Vedic philosophy from within the creation narratives themselves, speaking to the importance of philosophy from the very earliest texts we have from the tradition. The deep philosophical history of the Indo-Aryans, what we today call Vedanta (which Yoga is very closely related to and from which Buddhism emerged), ultimately sprung forth from these ancient creation stories, the mythological tradition as it were, which in turn yielded over time an in depth, scientific and analytical approach to the nature of mind and its relationship to liberation and experience of the divine which forms the basis of Yoga in all its forms.

Keywords – Indo-Aryan philosophy, Indo-Aryan cosmology, Vedic creation, Vedic cosmology, Indian philosophy, Indian mythology, Rig-Vedic hymns, Samkhya philosophy

1. Context of Vedic Cosmological Narratives

When one looks at the early creation myths of the Indo-Aryans, the first Hindus, one is confronted with the fact that their early mythology was not so clearly codified or synthesized as its sister cultures in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and certainly not as well codified and standardized as the mythology and cosmology of the Greeks and Romans. This was somewhat odd, especially given that the extant Sanskrit literature from antiquity was fairly extensive, but it's important to keep in mind that the creation mythology of the Hindus was spread throughout a few different texts and traditions, as found in the *Rig Veda*, *The Laws of Manu* and the *Puranas* for example. This approach, if it can be called that, is distinctive to Vedic and Hindu literature and is juxtaposed with what we find in the Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) tradition in the West where we see the myth and theological historical narrative encapsulated into a single book and single version (the *Old Testament*, *Qur'an*, etc.), and even in the Greco-Roman mythological traditions where we find mythological lore encapsulated in single textual traditions attributed to single authors such as Hesiod's *Theogony* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

When trying to understand the meaning and later interpretations of some of these ancient Vedic texts however, texts which included not just philosophical material but mythological material and details on ritual and sacrifice as well, it is critical to have some sense of context – culturally and socio-politically – to try and get to the true meaning and

import of the texts and how they impacted and were part of the development of this rich philosophical tradition.

This ancient Indus Valley civilization spread and flourished in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent from c. 3300 to 1300 BCE, roughly aligning with the peak of ancient Egyptian civilization. The *Rig Veda* in turn, as one of the primary source texts of the creation mythology of the Indus Valley peoples, is one of the oldest extant texts in the Indo-European language family and is thought to have been composed somewhere in the middle of the second millennium BCE, give or take a few centuries. [The Indo-European language family also contains Greek and Latin, although these languages are not directly related to the Sanskrit. The languages do share many of the same roots for words though, and the structure of the languages is similar hence the classification of the languages in the same family. It's not clear whether or not they derived from the same root however].

The civilization from which Hinduism emerged is traditionally associated with the Indus valley region, a river system from which an ancient culture could grow crops and thrive, a similar relationship to the Sumerians and their Tigris/Euphrates and the Egyptians and their Nile. This relationship with water and its fundamental existence and prerequisite feature for the source of life, is reflected throughout the Vedas and in the *Rig Veda* in particular, and clearly marked the cosmology and creation mythology of all of these ancient cultures. [See Valdez, J. (2014) pgs. 58-69 for more on the creation mythology of the Egyptians and Sumer-Babylonians]

2. Judeo-Christian Cosmology: The Book of Genesis

Lets start with a quick review of the creation story with which we are most familiar with in the West, our friend from *Genesis*. Everything we look at or analyze must stands in contrast to, or shares similarities with, something and the Judeo-Christian creation story is perhaps the most widely known and widely read passage of text and literature of all time, most certainly in the Western world (King James Version, Genesis 1-19).

1 *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*

2 *And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*

3 *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.*

4 *And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.*

5 *And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.*

6 *And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.*

7 *And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.*

8 *And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.*

9 *And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.*

10 *And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.*

11 *And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.*

12 *And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good.*

13 *And the evening and the morning were the third day.*

14 *And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:*

15 *And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.*

16 *And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.*

17 *And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,*

18 *And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.*

19 *And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.*

In this creation narrative, one that no doubt has shaped the theological beliefs of Western society for some 1500 years at least, we have the formulation of structure and time as underpinnings for the story itself – God creates the world in seven days – but we also see the emanation of various basic universal elements, and then the heaven and earth itself, that emerge from the “primordial waters”, a very old cosmological motif that is virtually ubiquitous in ancient civilization of the Middle, Near and Far East.

But core to this narrative in fact, and underlining the Judeo-Christian world-view (which in turn is shared by the Muslim tradition despite its basic disagreement with its Judeo-Christian brethren on the relative importance of various prophets and basic theological stances such as the Holy Trinity and its implications on the underlying unity of God/Allah) is the role of God, the grand creator, preserver (and ultimate destroyer) of not just humanity but the universe itself. In this tradition we do not have any thread of philosophical questions with respect to the unity of existence, duality from unity or even any epistemological questions as to what could be known or who it could be known by (the chicken and the egg question so to speak), we simply have a creation story in succinct form which lays out what was created, when, by whom in quite literal fashion – laying the groundwork for a moral and ethical framework which is just as unforgiving as it were, given its lack of philosophical foundations, despite the longstanding work done by the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition to facilitate these philosophical lines of questions.

When looking at the Indo-Aryan tradition, given its age and maturity and its fundamental belief and faith in the unity of man and the universe from which he emerged (unique to the Eastern religious traditions in general), a line can be drawn between creation mythology, aka *cosmology* [cosmology in this context to be the study of the origins of the universe from an ancient mythological or philosophical perspective as distinguished between today's, perhaps more widely known definition of cosmology which denotes the study of universal origins from a theoretical physics or astronomical perspective], and the philosophical underpinnings of the school of thought, or metaphysics as it were.

The connection between cosmology/creation mythology and philosophy is quite direct in the Vedic/Indo-Aryan philosophical tradition and in some sense this distinguishes this tradition from most other theological and philosophical traditions from antiquity and most certainly distinguishes it from Western theological traditions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) where philosophy and theology are very much subsumed and overwhelmed by scriptural dogma and law.

This delineation between philosophy and theology, philosophy and religion really, is not nearly as hard cut in the Eastern philosophical tradition as it is in the West, or at the very least it can be said that the connections between the two seemingly distinct areas of study and concepts are more evident because they are not clouded within a tradition that is more focused on literal interpretation and the “word” rather than underlying “meaning”.

To be fair the delegation of philosophy as a discipline and practice, or way of life, to religion, theology and faith in the “Word” is a somewhat later development in the West, aligned with the preeminence of the Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity as a systematic faith with approved scripture along with their associated approved interpretations of fundamental theological narratives (the Holy Trinity for example). This theological development not only marginalizes the Jewish faith and theological tradition, but also gives rise to Islam which arose in no small measure as a reaction and counterbalance to Christian interpretation of Biblical scripture and narrative, and in particular interpretation of the life and message of the prophet Jesus – and of course to fill a socio-political vacuum which is so often the case. With this rise in Christianity’s influence and predominance we see the waning of the Greco-Roman philosophical schools - Neo-Platonism, Stoicism and Epicureanism being the most far reaching and influential – after which we see a sharp decline in epistemological and social/ethical philosophy and a steep inclination toward scriptural dogma and moral and ethical platitudes and “law” as it were. Enter the Dark Ages.

3. Indo-Aryan Cosmology: The Hymn of Creation

One of the unique contributions of the Indo-Aryans is the conservation and preservation of the specificities of a great deal of their ancient sacrificial rites, hymns and mythology in textual form, i.e. the *Vedas*. The only corresponding set of texts and scripture that rivals it in terms of age is the *Avesta* of the Indo-Iranians (Persians) to the West, which although shares many similar linguistic and cultural themes that are found in the Vedic Sanskrit lore, does not have the same unbroken and longstanding continuing tradition of preservation and interpretation into the modern era as do the *Vedas*. So with the *Vedas* then we have a direct window into the world of the Asian & European pre-history like no other literary tradition in fact.

The Eastern philosophical tradition however remains unbroken with respect to its emphasis on basic, classical philosophical questions in tandem to its emphasis on faith and theology. No doubt the Eastern tradition in antiquity had its pantheon of Gods and Goddesses which were formed out of the primordial chaos from which the universe emanates, just as the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions espoused in fact, but the philosophical strain as it were was embedded deep in the Eastern traditions and was not subsumed by its anthropomorphic aspects and its scriptural tradition in and of

itself. In both Taoism and Hinduism, and of course with Buddhism, we see a much more philosophic flavor than the grand dictums of the Judeo-Christian traditions that cast such a long shadow, and eventually subsumed, the philosophic traditions of the Greco-Romans that had shaped the development of civilization for some one thousand years or so.

We can see this distinct and enduring philosophical bent of the Indo-Aryan people from some of the earliest passages we find about universal creation, cosmology, from the *Rig Veda* in particular, which codifies stories, remnants and artifacts of the ritualistic, mythological and philosophical belief systems of the Indo-Aryan peoples from the second millennium BCE (1900-1200 BCE) from which the Hindu religion eventually emerges - as well as Buddhism as its offshoot. And in these very early creation narratives, we find philosophical questions and openings that were preserved by the theological tradition of the East over millennia which provided scriptural support for philosophy itself, something again that is lacking in the Western theological tradition.

The *Rig Veda* is transcribed in Sanskrit verse, so there is a meter and a poetry to it that can only truly be appreciated when it is heard, typically when it is chanted as it is still done today. These verses, the text, is believed to be divinely inspired and to have co-existed with creation itself, and thereby lies at the heart of not just Vedanta but Hinduism proper as well. This belief in the co-existence of scripture with universal creation, or at least divine inspiration, is something that the Hindus share with their Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) brethren to the West.

From one of the earliest and most famous verses of the *Rig Veda*, one of the oldest Hindu/Vedic scriptural texts and perhaps some of the oldest extant theological literature that is presently known to man, we find the following very famous hymn sometimes called the *Nasadiya Sukta* (after the phrase *ná ásat* “not the non-existent”) from the 129th hymn of the 10th Mandala of the *Rig-Veda*. (Griffith 1896: Hymn CXXIX. *Creation*):

THEN was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.

Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was indiscriminated chaos. All that existed then was void and form less: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.

Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.

Transversely was their severing line extended: what was above it then, and what below it? There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder

Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?

He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.

Here we have, in the English translation/transliteration of course, one of the earliest perspectives on universal creation that has ever been written. While Old Testament Genesis creation mythology, which bears many similarities to Sumer-Babylonian mythos as has been well documented, is a first millennium BCE creation more or less, the *Rig Veda* verses and text have been dated to a period of time in ancient history some millennium or so earlier, to mid or late second millennium BCE and quite clearly stems from an oral tradition that is even much earlier than this (as is the case with much of the mythological texts that we find in antiquity, the Vedic literature being no exception). And yet, despite its relative age, in many respects it bears philosophical marks that we do not see in the West until the Greek philosophers centuries, millennium really, later.

What we see in this verse of the *Rig-Veda* from purely mythical perspective is very similar in some respects to what we see in ancient Egyptian and Sumer-Babylonian cultures, the origin of the universe stemming from a fundamental, non-differentiated and chaotic cosmic principle – in this case somewhat questioningly identified with water or *apas* [Ap (áp-) is the Vedic Sanskrit term for “water”, in classical Sanskrit occurring only in the plural, *apas*]. We also see clear anthropomorphic elements as well, establishing the basis for Hindu mythology and sacrificial rights that were an integral part of these ancient hunter-gatherers which we like to call the Indo-Aryans. But what we also see here, in one of the most famous and oft-quoted verses of the *Rig-Veda*, is the hint of the unknowable nature of the universe, laying the epistemological and philosophical groundwork to the long standing and rich philosophical tradition of the Indo-Aryan peoples from which Buddhism and Vedanta eventually emerge. This passage clearly indicates that this philosophical tradition in the East reaches deep into antiquity and parallels in many respects the philosophical developments that take place to the West, namely in classical Greece and Rome, but yet has roots that are at least one thousand years or so earlier in history.

What's also interesting about this verse in the *Rig Veda*, is that despite sharing many common cosmological motifs – order from chaos, primordial waters, desire (Eros) sowing the seed of creation – it also contains many of the core, underpinning philosophical elements that distinguish Vedanta from other theological traditions, not just in antiquity but into modern times as well. The unknowable nature of creation and the Creator, the role of breath or life force in the creative

process, the process of defining the unknowable by what it is *not* (versus what it is) which is a somewhat unique characteristic of the Eastern philosophical traditions and still can be found in some of the Buddhist and Vedic philosophical schools (Yoga for example with prana) even today. Many of these seeds are sown here, in this passage of the *Rig Veda* and it is for this reason that this text is still so widely revered even today by Vedic sages and scholars alike.

4. Vedic Cosmology II: Purusha Sukta

While the passage above from the *Rig Veda* contains some of the root kernel philosophical elements of Vedic philosophy, there is another passage from the same collection of hymns dating back to the 2nd millennium BCE that speaks to the more what we might call, classically ancient mythological, bent of the Indo-Aryans. This is a verse (quoted below) which describes a variation on the creation story/narrative which comes much closer to what we would call “myth”, and has a much more anthropomorphic bent than the esoteric passage quoted above (Griffith 1896: Hymn XC. *Purusa*):

1. A THOUSAND heads hath Puruṣa, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.

On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide.

2 This Puruṣa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be;

The Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food.

3 So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Puruṣa.

All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.

4 With three-fourths Puruṣa went up: one-fourth of him again was here.

Thence he strode out to every side over what eats not and what eats.

5 From him Virāj was born; again Puruṣa from Virāj was born.

As soon as he was born he spread eastward and westward o'er the earth.

6 When Gods prepared the sacrifice with Puruṣa as their offering,

Its oil was spring, the holy gift was autumn; summer was the wood.

7 They balmed as victim on the grass Puruṣa born in earliest time.

With him the Deities and all Sādhyas and Ṛṣis sacrificed.

8 From that great general sacrifice the dripping fat was gathered up.

He formed the creatures of-the air, and animals both wild and tame.

9 From that great general sacrifice *Rcas* and *Sāma*-hymns were born:

Therefrom were spells and charms produced; the *Yajus* had its birth from it.

10 From it were horses born, from it all cattle with two rows of teeth:

From it were generated kine, from it the goats and sheep were born.

11 When they divided *Puruṣa* how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

12 The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the *Rājanya* made.

His thighs became the *Vaiśya*, from his feet the *Śūdra* was produced.

13 The Moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had birth;

Indra and *Agni* from his mouth were born, and *Vāyu* from his breath.

14 Forth from his navel came mid-air the sky was fashioned from his head

Earth from his feet, and from his car the regions. Thus they formed the worlds.

15 Seven fencing-sticks had he, thrice seven layers of fuel were prepared,

When the Gods, offering sacrifice, bound, as their victim, *Puruṣa*.

16 Gods, sacrificing, sacrificed the victim these were the earliest holy ordinances.

The Mighty Ones attained the height of heaven, there where the *Sādhyas*, Gods of old, are dwelling.

Here we see many of the basic, core elements of ancient creation mythology that we are familiar with in the West – the creation of the seasons, animals, anthropomorphism, etc. We also see a connection drawn from the creation cosmology to societal and theological structure, i.e. the caste system which was such a key component of the Indo-Aryan peoples for much of their history, and the connection between hymn and scripture and the godhead himself. We also see the creation of the astral and celestial elements such as the Earth, Sun and Moon and Sky, as well as the emergence of the first pantheon of Gods such as *Indra*, *Vayu* and *Agni*, both elements that are found in creation mythology throughout antiquity (the Greeks, the Romans, etc.).

Furthermore, this ancient primordial pseudo-anthropological principal – *Puruṣa* - evolved over

time to become an integral part of two of the main Vedic philosophical systems, namely *Samkhya* and *Yoga*, each of which held universal creation to be a balance between two primordial forces – *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛiti* - male and female, inactive and active respectively, sharing many basic elements with Taoism (Yin/Yang) which emerged independently (presumably) in the Far East.

So again we see the roots of the core Vedic and Hindu philosophical elements in the very earliest cosmological narrative, speaking to the duration and strength of the lineage itself and the strong connection between the cosmological narrative and the philosophy – brothers in arms as it were.

5. Vedic Cosmology III: Manu, The Cosmic Egg and Dharma

We also find a very detailed account of creation in a very influential socio-political work from India called *The Laws of Manu* - aka *Manusmṛiti* - a work reflecting the latter part of the 2nd millennium BCE to the middle of the first millennium BCE (roughly running parallel with the transcription of the early *Upanishads*) dealing with social and cultural issues – laws, practices, customs, etc. - rather than ritual or mythical traditions as were codified in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. In it *Manu*, the mythical Adam of the Indo-Aryans, lays out the social philosophical principals and practices to a group of great sages (*rishis*), providing the guiding principals that were to underpin the governing of Indo-Aryan society for millennia.

Although not considered part of the orthodox Vedic scriptural tradition per se, the text is nonetheless extremely influential in the development of Indo-Aryan civilization, and Indian history in particular, as it lays the groundwork for the operation and management of a healthy society. The work may be looked at in contrast, or similar to Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* although it contains a much more practical, or perhaps more aptly put Judaic-Christian (and Islamic) bent, as it deals with laws and the proper functioning of society in a very concrete way whereas the Greek philosophers dealt much more in the abstract.

The text deals primarily with what is referred to in the Indian philosophical tradition as *dharma*, a fairly deep and profound term which can be loosely translated as righteousness, path, or way but is a sophisticated and profound term that implies righteous and aligned living and is tightly interwoven into social considerations, i.e. one's station in life. It is a concept which is found in the *Bhagavad Gita* as well and spans not just the Indian philosophical tradition but Buddhism too, speaking to its age, as well as its importance in the Eastern philosophical milieu in general.

But despite being a guidebook to good living and proper management of civilization as it were, the *Laws of Manu* contains a very well constructed and detailed creation story (two variants actually) at its very beginning as well, its author feeling compelled no doubt to establish the basic underpinnings of not just the Indo-Aryan society, but of the universe at large, helping the great seers of old to who he was

speaking connect the dots through creation itself to the emergence of advanced society.

Although a fairly lengthy passage, it is worth quoting (mostly) in full so the reader can gain a full appreciation of the depth of the story and its striking parallels with other ancient creation cosmological narratives (Olivelle, 2005: pgs. 87-88):

There was this world – pitch dark, indiscernible, without distinguishing marks, unthinkable, incomprehensible, in a kind of deep sleep all over. Then the Self-existent Lord appeared – the Unmanifest manifesting this world beginning with the elements, projecting his might, and dispelling the darkness. That One – who is beyond the range of the senses; who cannot be grasped; who is subtle, unmanifest, and eternal; who contains all beings; and who transcends thought – it is he who shone forth on his own.

As he focused his thought with the desire of bringing forth diverse creatures from his own body, it was the waters that he first brought forth; and into them he poured forth his semen. That became a golden egg, as bright as the sun; and in it he himself took birth as Brahma, the grandfather of all the worlds.

...

After residing in the egg for a full year, the Lord on his own split the egg in two by brooding on his own body. From these two halves, he formed the sky and the earth, and between them the mid-space, the eight directions, and the eternal place of the waters.

From his body, moreover, he drew out the mind having the nature of both the existent and the non-existent; and from the mind, the ego – producer of self-awareness and ruler – as also the great self, all things composed of the three attributes [the three gunas, or qualities; i.e. sattva, rajas and tamas] and gradually the five sensory organs that grasp the sense objects. By merging the subtle parts of these six possessing boundless might into particles of his own body, moreover, he formed all beings. Because the six parts of his physical frame became attached to these beings, the wise called his physical frame “body”. The great elements¹ enter it accompanied by their activities, as also the mind, the imperishable producer of all beings, accompanied by its subtle particles.

From the subtle particles of the physical frames of the seven males of great might, this world comes into being, the perishable from the imperishable. Of these,

each succeeding element acquires the quality specific to each preceding. Thus, each element, tradition tells us, possesses the same number of qualities as the number of its position in the series. In the beginning through the words of the Veda alone, he fashioned for all of them specific names and activities, as also specific stations.

The Lord brought forth the group of gods who are endowed with breath and whose nature it is to act, the subtle group of Sadhyas, and the eternal sacrifice. From fire, wind, and sun, he squeezed out the eternal triple Veda characterized by the Rig verses, the Yajus formulas, and the Saman chants, for the purpose of carrying out the sacrifice. Time, divisions of time, constellations, planets, rivers, oceans, mountains, flat and rough terrain, austerity, speech, sexual pleasure, desire, and anger – he brought forth this creation in his wish to bring forth these creatures.

To establish distinctions among activities, moreover, he distinguished the Right (dharma) from the Wrong (adharma) and afflicted these creatures with the pairs of opposites such as pleasure and pain. Together with the perishable atomic particles of the five elements given in tradition, this whole world comes into being in an orderly sequence. As they are brought forth again and again, each creature follows on its own the very activity assigned to it in the beginning by the Lord. Violence or non-violence, gentleness or cruelty, righteousness (dharma) or unrighteousness (adharma), truthfulness or untruthfulness – whichever he assigned to each at the time of creation, it stuck automatically to that creature. As the change of seasons each season automatically adopts its own distinctive marks, so do embodied beings adopt their own distinctive acts.

For the growth of these worlds, moreover, he produced from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet, the Brahmin, the Ksatriya, the Vaisya, and the Sudra.

Here we see a much more comprehensive and elaborate creation story relative to its parallel verses in the Vedas, and the integration of a much more sophisticated philosophical system, but yet at the same time shows clear signs of strong Vedic (*Rig-Veda*) influence. We see the emergence of an ordered world from a primordial chaotic universe through the will and power of an anthropomorphic grand deity, the universe itself being a manifestation of his physical form and creation occurring by his will/seed across the primordial waters.

We see reference to some of the core Vedic philosophical and archaic elements such as the three gunas or attributes, as well as a thinly veiled reference to the five classic elements of the universe from the Indian philosophical perspective (diverged somewhat from the classic earth, air, water, fire that we are accustomed to seeing in the West). We have ether, wind, light, water, and earth, each created one from the other at the beginning of the universe, emanating from the mind of

¹ “Elements” here, and below, referring to the five classic elements of the universe from the Indian philosophical perspective which diverged somewhat from the classic earth, air, water, fire that we are accustomed to seeing (alchemy for example) in the West. We have ether, wind, light, water, and earth, each created one from the other at the beginning of the universe, emanating from the mind of the creator when he awakens from his deep sleep. The process of creation of these elements, and their associated characteristics, is delineated in passage 1.75-8 of Laws of Manu and is alluded to here – “in a series”.

the creator when he awakens from his deep sleep. [The process of creation of these elements, and their associated characteristics, is delineated in passage 1.75-8 of *Laws of Manu* and is alluded to here – “in a series”.]

We also see the inclusion of the analogy of the “cosmic egg” from which came forth the sky and the earth, a metaphor which can be found in various *Brahmanas* (commentaries on the Vedas transcribed in the first few centuries first millennium BCE), and in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.19), one of the earliest of the Upanishads (from the early part of the first millennium BCE). In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the cosmic egg splits into golden and silver parts and from which the sky and earth germinate respectively and a reference to this same “golden egg” can also be found in *Rig Veda* verse as well (10.121), where the Sanskrit word *Hiranyagarbha* (Griffith 1896: Hymn CXXI, 10.121), literally the “golden womb” or “golden egg”, is used as an epithet of the Creator, or Brahma (See Witzel, 2012 pgs. 121-124 for a comprehensive look at the cosmic egg analogy in world myth).

We furthermore see in this rendition of creation the emergence of the Gods, the Vedas themselves and the rituals which they describe and encode, the core elements of the universe (ether, wind, light, water, earth), the celestial elements of the universe, time itself, etc. all emerging from this great creation process, as do the creation of all living beings and creatures on earth. Parallels here can be drawn directly with the order of creation in Genesis for example, while the segmentation into 7 days isn’t found but the basic natural universal creation narrative follows a very similar line.

Finally at the end, and consistent with the purpose of the treatise as a whole, with some antecedents found in the Vedas themselves, we have a final attestation of the establishment of right (*dharma*) from wrong (*adharma*), as well as the basic social structure, as the final piece of creation and the establishment of order, leading quote nicely into the text itself which now sits on the foundation of universal order, from which the social order arises.

6. Summary: Vedic Cosmology, a Distinctive Approach

So what we see in the Vedic-Hindu creation mythological narrative then, and what distinguishes it from the Judeo-Christian tradition (again within which we place Islam) is a strong philosophical and analytical bent that goes back to the roots of the very scriptural tradition itself. This unbroken tradition, which starts with the pre-historical Indo-Aryans as reflected in the Vedas, and then passes through the Upanishadic phase which further codifies and elaborates on the philosophical and ritualistic tradition that we find in the Vedas and then moves to a more classic Western epic poetry phase which involves the pre-eminence of Gods and heroes – the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* – includes not just what we would consider to be the classic theological components of a religion in today’s modern parlance – the classic creation story/myth - but also an underlying thread of

philosophy and esotericism which were altogether abandoned from the Judeo-Christian narrative as it looked to focus more not on incorporating various streams of thought and schools of (philosophical) belief but on excluding as many different interpretations and traditions as possible so as to avoid any shadow of doubt with respect to how God was to be viewed and how his creation was to be perceived and even how one was to live their life in concordance with the laws of the Church.

So the Hindu creation mythology ascribes the source of the universe to Brahma, a layer of anthropomorphic abstraction between Brahman and the world of gods and men, who sits atop of the creation and destruction of this known universe, and that in turn each known universe has its own creation, preservation and destruction process and this process repeats itself ad infinitum through the ages. The Brahma of the Hindus is equivalent theologically to the Judeo-Christian God.

With the Indo-Aryan tradition then, we find belief in a single unified Creator God, Brahma, coupled with a robust philosophical tradition - Vedanta - from which the social and ethical structure of society evolves from and sits upon (as exemplified with Manu’s Laws and ethical precepts), and we also have a rich mythical poetic narrative, that is coupled with and compliments this deep philosophical system of thought no doubt capturing the imagination of Hindu’s from time immemorial. The cosmology embedded in the various scriptural texts, some of which we have looked at in detail here, captures essence and order of universal creation, the establishment of different classes of society, the creation narrative from the basic primary elements of universal matter to gods, sages, humans and all the way to the rest of life – plants, animals, etc.

References

- Witzel, M. (2012). “*The Origins of the World’s Mythologies*”, Oxford University Press.
- Olivelle, P. (2005). “*Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmasastra*”, Oxford University Press.
- Macdonell, A.A., Oldenberg, H., Muller, M. (2014). “*The Golden Book of the Holy Vedas*”, Vijay Goel.
- Wilson, H.H. (2005). “*The Visnu-Puranam: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition*”, Parimal Publications.
- Valdez, J. (2014). “*Snow Cone Diaries: A Philosopher’s Guide to the Information Age*”, Authorhouse LLC.
- Griffith, R. (1896). “*The Hymns of the Rig Veda*”.